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ABSTRACT

Because proficiency in nonverbal communication is as important in international business communication as it is in one's own culture, temporary residents need to learn how to improve communication. This paper explores several ways business communication specialists can help improve sojourners' nonverbal fluency for specific cultures. Temporary residents can become more skilled at handling nonverbal messages developing a knowledge of media and culture as well as the ability to show empathy for others, to tolerate ambiguity without frustration, to show respect, and to take turns. Specific instruction in paralanguage, proxemics, kinesics, the use of time, and dress is also helpful. (EL)

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NONVERBAL ELEMENTS OF INTERNATIONAL BUSINESS COMMUNICATION

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ABSTRACT

Proficiency in nonverbal communication is as important in international business communication as it is within one's own culture. This paper explores several ways business communication specialists can help improve sojourner's nonverbal fluency for specific cultures. The paper explores why nonverbal communication has been so difficult to teach. The approach has often been wrong, and sojourners have often resisted training strongly. In addition, the paper applies the need for empathy to training and suggests a specific focus of training for each source of nonverbal communication.

INTRODUCTION

The close study of nonverbal communication is still in its relative youth. Whereas much is already known about the subject, much remains to be learned. A great deal of that study has been done in North American culture, much less in others. Not nearly so well explored has been the interrelationship of nonverbal communication between cultures. The same amount of research that has been devoted to other aspects (e.g., Gudykunst, 1983, and Samovar & Porter, 1982) needs to be devoted to this area. We do know that whereas the media used to send nonverbal messages are common to most cultures, the meanings derived from those signs vary radically from culture to culture.

Thus, one may have facility in the nonverbal language of one culture, which allows one to recognize a few inborn activities and to spot nonverbal leakage derived from autonomic reactions. However, that facility may have little application to other cultures. Yet facility is needed if one is to participate fully in international business communication. If nonverbal symbols can account for as much as 93 percent of a message (at least in our culture), professionals are not doing enough merely to teach verbal language; they must also teach nonverbal language.

Of course, total mastery is not possible, in fact not even necessary. As Hall and Whyte note, one must learn to adjust, not conform (Hall and Whyte, 1960). If we're "just like them," our

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behavior might become suspect. Sojourners are expected to be different even as they are expected to respect and accept others.

SOURCE OF PROBLEM

This paper explores some ways business communication specialists can help improve sojourners' nonverbal fluency for a specific culture--ways to bring that fluency up to a useful level to improve overall communication. In doing so, the paper explores why nonverbal communication has been so difficult to handle, the paper explores why it continues to be so (largely as a result of weak or inadequate training), and finally the paper briefly sketches out a systematic approach to nonverbal communication.

Lack of Awareness

Why nonverbal languages is so difficult to master is not far to seek. The sojourner is asked to learn about things he/she has usually never had to think about in the past. Whereas much of what one does nonverbally is unconscious and automatic, the sojourner must suddenly be aware of what he/she might normally "say" nonverbally while learning to express that message or read it in a different way.

At the same time, once one is aware of nonverbal communication, one has a challenge to deal with it because it is so idiomatic. In fact, pinpointing any one meaning is more difficult nonverbally than it is verbally. And, just as verbal language changes, so does nonverbal.

Improper Training

As if all that is not enough, even if the would-be expatriate were conscious of the value of nonverbal communication, the training he/she receives is not likely to be all that useful. Although training programs will occasionally include nonverbal considerations, those are the exceptions. In fact, much training focuses on dos and don'ts, or what one author calls "dissatisfiers" (Stewart, 1977, p. 20). That is, the training focuses on how the prospective sojourner should or should not be relative to the most basic tasks (for example training in the vocabulary for food, shelter, or comfort).

Unfortunately, knowing how to handle these basics is not enough for the sojourner once he/she gets there. While essential dissatisfaction declines as the basic needs are met, satisfaction does not rise. Maslow's model is appropriate here. The prospective sojourner learns to handle the survival basics, but gets nowhere near self actualization at the top of the ladder. As Stewart notes, "beneath the hard surface of survival issues, the traveler has from the beginning confronted the deeper levels of cultural differences, which are typically perceived in nonverbal communication, such as traveler's use of time--or of space--tone of voice, facial expressions, posture and body movement" (Stewart, 1977, p. 21).

Obviously what the traveler needs is instruction in the satisfiers, but this instruction is often left out. Ironically, this gap is not because of malice, but because the prospective sojourner often wants nothing but information about the dissatisfiers. The prospect of overseas travel threatens his/her security and well being, and knowledge about dissatisfiers seems to promise security. Only when the far shore is reached does the sojourner realize how much has been missed.

My own experiences are relevant here. My training in French (5 years) gave me no nonverbal cues apart from the interrogatory. As a result, my communication overseas was usually lifeless and never extended beyond ordering in restaurants. In my training for Peace Corps, the only nonverbal preparation I received was to avoid using the left hand for social purposes--hardly enough to achieve self actualization in North Africa!

GENERAL TRAINING OBJECTIVES

Clearly, training in nonverbal aspects of a culture is vital if one is to live and prosper within that culture. But how to approach nonverbal communication--how to master even part of the 93 percent of a message--is a challenge.

Knowledge of Media and Culture

As a first step prospective sojourners must be familiar with the multitude of sources of nonverbal communication available. The notion that it is purely concerned with gestures is naive, even dangerous. Knowing the range of nonverbal communication is the first step to mastering it.

Furthermore, individuals about to enter the culture must be familiar with that culture. Communication patterns are clearly affected by the culture in which they occur (Hall and Whyte, 1960). Not all nonverbal communication is a logical outgrowth of its culture, but much is. In fact knowledge of the culture may be enough to evaluate unfamiliar behavior. Thus, one need not be trained in every single gesture and movement to understand the meaning of nonverbal messages. Knowing, for example, a Moslem culture's attitude about women can go far to explicate much of the nonverbal behavior relative to women in that culture. Thus, foreign women frequently assume the men are overly forward when, in fact, the men read the women's western dress as suggestive.

Need for Empathy

Hand in hand with the need for awareness of the culture is the need for empathy. This need is underscored by several theorists (Hall & Whyte, 1960; Ruben & Kealey, 1977; Bennett, 1979). The empathic sojourner realizes that differences between individuals from separate cultures are deep and real. Another culture has its own

validity in itself. Gestures and actions that seem petty or pointless from our perspective are used in another culture because they are significant to the other culture.

Thus, using empathy, one should approach the overseas experience not from one's own narrow cultural perspective, but from a neutral, non-judgmental one. The other culture is neither good nor bad; it merely is. The empathic ideal is what Bennett calls the platinum rule--one does unto others as they themselves would have done unto them (Bennett, 1979).

Necessary Constructs

As for the nonverbal signals themselves, what to include may seem an overwhelming task. Some sort of system is needed. Fortunately, certain patterns suggest themselves; certain generalizations seem valid. Ruben sets out several criteria for cross-cultural effectiveness which lend themselves to a greater or less extent to nonverbal communication. The most notable of these is the ability of the sojourner to tolerate (or at least seem to tolerate) ambiguity without seeming flustered. Another is empathy (which lends itself to nonverbal expression); a third is the ability to display respect; and a fourth is skill in turn taking. With the fourth, one may find that he/she needs either to add or elicit information in conversation, and nonverbal behavior can be useful in that respect (Ruben, 1978).

NONVERBAL MEDIA

What of the different nonverbal media? What of paralanguage, time, proxemics, kinesics, and dress? Specific instruction in each one of these areas is the ideal, but unfortunately not all sojourners have the time to devote to each one. However, a few general areas are worth considering as a minimum.

Paralanguage

Paralanguage should probably be taught in detail, but by those who know (or should know) it best: language instructors. Its values are undeniable, of course, since much that is rich and most that is subtle in a culture comes through paralanguage, including liking as well as scorn, and irony, humor, and pity. Interestingly, natives perhaps because they are so conscious of language differences, probably, tolerate vocalic errors more than miscues from any other nonverbal source. Of greater impact, then, are those nonverbal elements one does not normally think about. One can react unknowingly to them without understanding why.

Proxemics

Proxemics (taken in its broadest sense of one's culturally dictated place in an environment equally culturally dictated) might be the most obvious of the subtle nonverbal aspects. Naturally, individuals automatically distance themselves from others and interpret the new environment often before any significant verbal interaction takes place. The unaware expatriate who enters a strange environment and reacts to it and within it as if it were her/his own starts off wrong. Thus, an expatriate should be ready for crowding in Arab or Latin American countries, just as one would be for relatively open space in America. Proxemics is good to start with, too, because much of it is so objective. Often it flows naturally from a culture, making understanding relatively simple.

Time

Another concern of immediate value that is often included in nonverbal language is the use of time. One's handling of time can speak volumes about one both within and outside one's own culture; the key is that much of what it says outside may be unintentional, but disastrous in its interpretation. The American who arrives "on time" for a meeting in Latin America and, after being kept waiting, gets angry, is applying the wrong meaning to the signals his/her host is sending. That same American will also send the wrong signals if he/she tries to get down to business immediately after gaining entry. Fortunately, the basics of time, like proxemics, are objective and easy to learn. Of course, subtle nuances can enter in. For example, how late can one be in our culture and still not offend?

The first two elements, proxemics and time, are what make up much of the first impression that a sojourner gets and gives in an interaction. They are both relatively easy to learn, at least in their most general aspects.

Kinesics

Less simple, but obviously of great value, is kinesics, the posture we adopt and the gestures we make during interaction. Since certain actions are apparently the same (for example, the discomfort one feels at meeting strangers is leaked by body blocking of some sort, or deception through fidgeting), at least some already know many of the nonverbal signals. On the other hand, the vast bulk of gestures is probably culture specific. Of first importance might be a focus on those gestures from the sojourner's culture which could be interpreted negatively in the host culture. An obvious example is our "O.K." sign, which is obscene in some cultures. Then, if time remains, the focus could be on more positive gestures in the new culture. Good ones would be those for showing trust or friendliness. Of additional value would be discussion of culture-specific practices, the ignorance of which could offend. For example, if one should not expose the soles of the feet in some cultures, one should be aware. In other cultures, if one does not serve food with the left hand, one should know. If shoes are

not worn in mosques (where feet are also washed), sojourners should be so warned.

Eye contact is another concern; how it is carried out varies from culture to culture. Some cultures have a far more intense pattern than our on-again, off-again one. Others avoid contact except for periodic glances. Such patterns are easily learned and repay practice many times over.

Dress

Dress is the final area of concern and probably needs the least amount of attention (relatively). As Hall and Whyte (and others) have pointed out, expatriates are identifiable as such and are not expected to go completely native (Hall & Whyte, 1960). With the widespread adoption of Western dress, differences are disappearing from most cultures (with the obvious exception of Iran). The main concern for training is knowing when the dress of the sojourner clashes with native mores--or when it shows disrespect (as with shoes in the mosque). Thus, stringent modesty for women in many Moslem countries would be the rule. At the same time, such is possible through modifications of the sojourner's own dress without having to resort to native dress, which so often looks insincere when worn by expatriates.

CONCLUSIONS

Clearly the need for training in nonverbal communication for expatriates is patent. Proper training can be ensured only when expatriates realize that training in satisfiers is just as vital as in dissatisfiers. Then, too, development of empathy is vital. Once these two suggestions have been implemented, training should focus on specific nonverbal aspects detailed in this paper which will help sojourners achieve self actualization while avoiding negative signals.

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